

# **Corporate environmental sustainability and customer experience management: Is it possible to integrate their perspectives?**

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## **Abstract**

The last few years have been characterized by a growing and constant interest in the theme of corporate environmental sustainability (CES) on the one hand and customer experience management (CEM) on the other hand. However, while there is a growing interest among scholars and practitioners on these two topics, the link between the two approaches to investigate the nature and the potentiality of this relationship is very sparse. The aim of this paper is to shed the light on this topic by providing an overview on the current state of research on environmental sustainability and customer experience management. Coherently, the research is a first attempt to define the meeting points and the opportunities derived from a strategic integrated approach between CES and CEM. In addition, in this explorative stage of the research, the authors provide important implications for consumers, firms and society as theoretical and practical contribution to the scientific debate.

*Keywords:* Corporate Environmental sustainability (CES), Customer experience management (CEM), Integrated model

## **Introduction**

Two of the most relevant terms in management and marketing studies at an academic and professional level are currently environmental sustainability and customer experience. The environment and customer centricity have been the key priorities for companies to survive and compete more effectively (Gartner, 2019; Signori *et al.*, 2019). Especially after the events related to the covid-19 pandemic, the importance of preserving the environmental ecosystem has become a topic that has raised the sensitivity of citizens, firms and governments. At the same time, the centrality of customers has become crucial to attract and maintain them in an increasingly competitive context (Fader, 2020; Peppers and Rogers, 2017).

It's indeed hard to find a firm that says: a. we don't care about customers, and b. we don't care about being good corporate citizens (Forrester, 2010). That said, it's astonishing to see how harder and rare is to put at the heart of the business the customer and the environment.

However, there is a great opportunity for the chief customer officer and the chief sustainability officer to form an alliance that could strengthen both.

Corporate environmental management (CES) is a prominent, rapidly growing trend in modern business, reflecting the reciprocal relationship between the natural environment and a firm's operations (Boutilier, 2011; Walls, Berrone, and Phan, 2012).

CEM refers to the strategic management process of a customer's entire experience with a company or brand (Homburg, Jozić, & Kuehnl, 2017). According to the recent trends (Gartner, 2019; Capgemini, 2017; Forrester, 2017 and KPMG, 2019), customer experience (CEX) is considered the new competitive key for business, even if the gap between a theoretical awareness and a practical implementation is still huge. Only the 15% of companies may develop a customer experience plan in practice (Harvard Business Review, 2017).

From a theoretical point of view, the theme of customer experience has been argued mainly from an operational marketing perspective (Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Brakus et al. 2009) and only recently scholars have contributed to deliver a clearer and wider understanding on CE and CEM

(Homburg *et al.*, 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). These recent contributions highlight the importance to consider the CEM approach as a strategic process which embraces the complexity of the entire company (Ferraresi and Schmitt, 2006) with the final goal to build memorable experience for customers.

Since we consider customer experience as “*the cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial and social responses during the entire journey*”, so it begins with the first interaction with the firm and seamlessly continues through to the period after the consumption” (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Homburg, Jozić, & Kuehnl, 2017), this approach should not be considered in an operational marketing perspective, but a strategic approach based on the customer-firm relationship which may offers the opportunity to differentiate the product offering and help firms to increase the customer loyalty and the positive word of mouth, promote the cross-selling, reduce of price sensitivity, and stimulate the reputation growth (Klink, Zhang and Athaide, 2020).

Despite the growing interest for CES and CEM in management and marketing literature and the widespread consideration that both are crucial to achieve a successful competitive differentiation advantage, they are currently studied in isolated way and mainly approached in an operational perspective (Muller, 2014; Moliner *et al.*, 2019; Shukla and Pattnaik, 2019; Signori *et al.*, 2019).

To bridge this gap, this research tries to shed the lights on the possible connection of these emerging trends in management and marketing studies. In particular, the overall contribution of this paper is to investigate the concepts of environmental sustainability and customer experience management to answer to the following research question: Can the CES and CEM approaches be integrated? Motivated by this aim, the paper proposes an integrated strategic framework which opens new perspectives for scholars and firms.

## **Theoretical background**

Particularly after the pandemic crisis, people are spending more consciously and environmental sustainability-oriented, buying local and are embracing digital commerce (Lubowiecki-Vikuk *et al.*, 2021). More generally, there is a wider awareness on personal and social health and a higher respect for environment (Borsellino *et al.*, 2020, Sorrentino *et al.*, 2020). People is more willing to buy local, organic food and experience nature (Gfk, 2020, Shet, 2020).

Currently, purchase and consumption experience and sustainability are the two main goals for firms to achieve the competitive advantage.

Indeed, both researcher and practitioners are devoting a growing interest on these topics and it is probable that the achievement of a sustainable experience for customers and a more responsible cultural mindset will become the market goal after covid-19 emergency. However, at the best of our knowledge, they still fail to shed the lights on the opportunity that can come from merging these two goals. Thus, in this paper we try to understand if firms consider consumer green needs in the customer experience management by starting from the assessment of the key theoretical background.

## **Corporate Environmental sustainability (CES)**

Commitment to the natural environment gained a great importance on national agendas and policymakers interests, becoming a crucial variable in the current economic competition and forcing many companies to change their attitude towards environmental issues.

In this vein, corporate environmental management is becoming a growing trend in modern business, reflecting the reciprocal relationship between the natural environment and a firm's strategy and operations (Boutillier, 2011; Walls, Berrone, and Phan, 2012).

Environmental strategy, especially its antecedents and impact on business performance, has been the subject of an ongoing debate (Christmann, 2000; Russo and Fouts, 1997; Aragón-Correa and Sharma, 2003; Menguc et al., 2010; Walls et al., 2011; Delmas et al., 2011). In particular, scholars recognized that the introduction of proactive corporate environmental strategies may be used by companies to gain competitive advantage toward competitors, enhancing their position in the market and developing the resources and capabilities useful for building long term profit potential (Bansal and Roth, 2000; Buysse and Verbeke, 2003; Aragon-Correa and Sharma, 2003; Cordeiro and Tewari, 2015).

Firms that incorporate natural environment objectives in their strategies may reduce operating costs, have better use of resources and capabilities and take advantage of market opportunities created by an increasing demand for environmental friendly goods and services (Berrone and Gomez-Mejia, 2009), in addition to managing risk, including reputational risk, and, in general, increasing the economic benefits derived from improved stakeholder relations (Cordeiro and Tewari, 2015).

In particular, environmental sustainability differentiation strategy can be implemented by improving brand image, developing sustainable products and services (Walsh and Doodds, 2017). In other words, if a company wants to gain a sustainability differentiation advantage, it must integrate environmental thinking into all aspects of marketing (Moravcikova et al., 2017).

Marketing is essential in this process since it can play a key role for the creation of a green market (e.g. Rex and Baumann, 2007) by communicating with consumers to increase their awareness about environmental sustainability and informing them about the benefits of environmentally sustainable products and services. Environmental sustainability marketing or green marketing is a much broader concept, one that can be applied to consumer commodity, industrial goods and even services (Polonsky, 1994) and has been considered as a strategic tool to position companies in the market, differentiating products and services and creating trust with environmental stakeholders (Walsh and Dodds, 2017).

Green Marketing would foster, on the one hand, cleaner production through the development of green products and, on the other hand, sustainable consumption through the successful marketing of them (Dangelico and Vocalelli, 2017).

Scholars have identified three different pillars in which green marketing research can be classified, namely strategic green marketing, tactical green marketing and internal green marketing (Papadas et al., 2017).

With regards to strategic green marketing, there are two factors that affect company's strategic involvement toward natural environment, namely the probable size of the green market in their sector and those marketers' ability to differentiate their green products from the ordinary or green products of competitors (Ginsberg and Bloom, 2004; Davari and Strutton, 2014).

According these factors, company can assume a *Defensive* or *Lean Green Strategy*, by temporary promote green initiatives or activities, often subsidies from governmental or environmental agencies. On the contrary, the more assertive *Shaded Green Strategy* helps firms develop competitive advantages based on their ability to deliver innovative, green needs-satisfying

products and technologies (Chen & Lin, 2011), albeit environmental values in their offering is considered a secondary benefit (Ginsberg & Bloom, 2004; Davari and Strutton, 2014).

An *Extreme Green Strategies* is rather implemented when natural environment attitude shapes holistic business philosophies and pervades throughout the organization, making firms to integrate environmental issues into their core business and processes (Chen & Lin, 2011).

This marketing strategy refers to long-term, top management actions and policies specifically focusing on corporate environmental strategy (Banerjee, 2002), proactive environmental strategies (Aragón-Correa, 1998) and external environmental stakeholders (Polonsky, 1995).

The orientation toward Tactical Green Marketing (TGMO) involves short-term actions that transform the traditional marketing mix into a greener one. Green marketing mixes broadly entail green product development and the execution of pricing, promotional, and/or supply chain tactics specifically aimed at promoting or preserving environmental welfare (Kinoti, 2011; Davari and Strutton, 2014). For example the decision to reduce product environmental footprint (e.g. Pujari et al., 2003), promotion tools that boost products' environmental benefit or reduce environmental damage.

When extreme green marketing strategies are pursued, all four traditional marketing mix elements are engaged (Davari and Strutton, 2014).

The latter orientation, namely Internal green marketing orientation (IGMO) rather focus on the rise environmental values across the organization to embed a wider corporate green culture (Papadas & Avlonitis, 2014), such as employee training; efforts to promote environmental awareness inside the organization (Charter & Polonsky, 1999; McDaniel & Rylander, 1993) and environmental leadership activities (Ramus, 2001).

From this discussion, the link between environmental sustainability and marketing is evident, especially to form positive brand perceptions in consumers' mind. What consumers are currently looking for is "environmental sustainability" and "experience" (Signori *et al.*, 2019). They want to receive more than the simply utilitarian value from their purchases, so firms need to create a multilevel experience that create value for customers, society and the planet (Polonsky, 2011).

That's why the current challenge for innovative firms is try to combine "sustainability" and "customer experience", however current literature fails to provide any theoretical or practical construct that combine the fields of corporate environmental sustainability on customer experience management.

### **Customer experience management (CEM)**

Customer experience (CE) has been conceptualized in different ways, however recent definitions seem meeting towards the following definition: "the cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial and social responses during the entire journey" so it begins with the first interaction with the firm and seamlessly continues through to the period after the consumption (Brakus et al. 2009; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Homburg *et al.*, 2017). While Brakus et al. (2009) have linked these consumers' responses to the ability of the brand to evoke positive stimuli through the experience' providers (e.g. design and identity, packaging, communications and environments), recently others authors pointed out that the customer experience management should not be considered in an experiential marketing perspective only, but it should imply a strategic process which embraces the complexity of the entire company (Homburg *et al.*, 2017; Ferraresi and Schmitt, 2006).

Customer experience management is not new (Schmitt, 2010), however it is recently assuming a relevant importance both for scholars and for practitioners as innovative strategic approach to survive and compete more effectively (Homburg, Jozić, & Kuehnl, 2017). In its first definition,

CEM referred to the strategic management process of a customer's entire experience with a company or brand. This definition is a wider perspective which include not only the experiential marketing (Schmitt, 2010) but also the entire strategic firm management (e.g. employee engagement, resources management).

The need to study the CEM as a firm-wide strategic approach derives from the consideration that products and marketing stimuli do not create a competitive advantage for companies alone. Customers are the only real source that generates revenue and value (Peppers and Rogers, 2019). It is not only important to worry about inducing stimuli but to create valuable experiences for consumers, customized according to their profile, their needs and their expectations. This is possible only by analyzing the customers' world in depth, understanding and remembering their needs to involve them in a relationship through better products and services.

Compared to the traditional customer relationship management (CRM) approach, some differences can be found in the CEM approach. First, in a CEM-oriented approach, the firm-customers relationships are considered along the entire customer journey and not only in the post-purchase stage to monitor the satisfaction/dissatisfaction (Ferraresi and Schmitt, 2006). Second, consumers are considered as rational and emotional so that the value proposition is based on functional and emotional elements, while in the traditional marketing concept, the main value was functional based on the perceived quality (Sanchez-Fernandez and Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). Third, as the main aim of CEM is engage people in an overall emotional experience, the monitoring methods are eclectic. In fact, to measure the real consumers perceptions, new techniques (e.g. neuromarketing) are used to integrate and overcome the bias of the survey and big data (Sorrentino, 2020).

With regard to CEM in a strategic perspective, a recent study recent conducted by Homburg, Jozić, & Kuehnl, 2017 (2017) have identified three dimensions that affect company's strategic contribution toward customer experience, that is the probable size of the CEM orientation: a. Cultural mindset, b. Strategic directions and c. Firm capabilities.

Specifically, the "cultural mindset" refers to managers mental orientation to describe their competitive advantage and includes three latent dimensions called experiential response orientation, touchpoint journey orientation and alliance orientation.

The second factor "strategic directions" refer to the design of CEM and includes the thematic cohesion of touchpoints, consistency of touchpoints, connectivity of touchpoints.

The third second-order factor "firm capabilities" refer to the ability to continually renew CE over time and includes: touchpoint prioritization, touchpoint journey monitoring and touchpoint adaptation. The model so defined, frames a concept of CEM which is referred not only to the marketing orientation, but it comprises all the internal process and the cultural aspects.

From the practioners' world, another model which tries to map the dimensions to achieve a CEM orientation as differentiation strategy has been designed by KPMG.

They have identified six dimensions called 'Six Pillars' as follow: Customization, Integrity, Expectations, Resolution, Time and Commitment and Empathy. These factors represent six fundamental dimensions through which a customer judges the interaction with a brand. It is precisely on these elements that companies must focus on improving customer relations.

These two recent models of understanding and measuring CEM highlight a strong orientation to the customer as a person, whose value becomes the primary goal of the relationship with the company. Moreover, being the employees the internal customers of the companies, both in a practical (KPMG, 2019) and in an academic approach (Ferraresi and Schmitt, 2006; Homburg et al., 2017), the role of human resources becomes strategic in the CEM implementation because it has been assumed that satisfied employees mean satisfied customers.

From this discussion, the concept of CEM cannot be considered exclusively a marketing concept but concerns the entire cultural mindset of the company, likewise the orientation towards environmental sustainability.

From this first review of these key theoretical points, it is possible to glimpse some meeting points, which open to interesting synergies between the two strategies. First, both are currently considering crucial to be distinctive from the competitors; second, both the perspectives are considered at a strategic level which include an internal and an external perspective; third, both are *other-oriented* value being focused on customers and environment and finally, both are oriented toward a long-term success.

This background forms the basis for our motivation to explore the topic of this paper, specifically, our research question is “Can CES and CEM be integrated?”. To answer this question, a first explorative literature review has been conducted and a novel integrated framework is proposed.

## **Method**

Due to the explorative nature of the research, after having reviewed the two topic “Corporate environmental sustainability” (CES) and “Customer experience management” (CEM) individually, an exploratory literature review (Arksey and O’Malley, 2005) was undertaken to analyse the two topics in a comprehensive manner and identify possible meeting points.

The review aimed at summarising and disseminating available research findings and identifying research gaps in the existing literature related to our research question.

As the small number of available studies (in particular from peer-reviewed sources) were identified by using academic databases (Scopus, EBSCO, WoS) and Internet search engines (Google and Google Scholar) with combinations of keywords such as environmental sustainability, customer experience, customer experience management, sustainability.

A limited number of the studies emerged, and none focused on the integration of CES and CEM precisely. However, first attempts to explore a possible integration came out. Specifically, five studies have been found. Three articles on peer-reviewed journals, one book chapter and one white paper. Four of them are explorative and use qualitative data. Only one journal article use survey data because approaching to the issue from a consumer behaviour perspective.

While academia is in its early stage, a wider number of managerial articles on the integration between CES and CEM can be found from main consultancy companies and online communities as Forrester, Customer Think and Gartner. Given the limited number of relevant studies published in refereed journals, in the stage of the research, in the next paragraph, authors show the main findings from the two studies more coherent to our research question (Muller, 2014; Signori *et al.*, 2019) and propose an integrated model, which is our contribution to the current state-of-the-art.

### **CES and CEM: state-of-the-art and meeting points: toward an integrate model**

With respect to the individual topics of CES and CEM, current research rarely pursues the integrated perspective. To fully take advantage of the potential of the comprehensive research field of sustainability-oriented CEM, there is a need for further research.

Muller (2014), after reviewing the main literature on Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and sustainability, provides a list of some research opportunities derived from an integrated

approach. First of all, there is a theoretical gap which opens up the opportunity to examine the interconnectedness of the three dimensions of sustainability in customer-related contexts. Second, there is the need to specifically consider the environmental sustainability propensity of the customers when firms design the customer experience. They should consider the consumers as an individual, a community member with a long-term stake in the future of the planet (Muller, 2014).

More recently, Signori *et al.* (2019) published a research where authors have explored the main literature on “Sustainability” and “Customer Experience” by confirming the theoretical gap to consider the goals together and the need to integrate the perspective. Indeed, the sustainability-oriented approach, based on stakeholders’ perspective, considers as key partners the totality of actors, resources and activities related to sustainability. According to this approach, in order to create corporate value, it’s fundamental to consider the wellbeing of every stakeholder related with firms ‘activities, including the customers and the employees. On the other hand, from the literature review, it emerges that there exist an increasing consumers’ interest toward “green” and “experience” oriented choices (Signori *et al.*, 2019).

Especially after the pandemic crisis, customers are people are shopping more consciously and environmental sustainability-oriented, buying local and are embracing digital commerce (Lubowiecki-Vikuk *et al.*, 2021). More generally, there is a wider awareness on personal and social health and a higher respect for environment (Borsellino *et al.*, 2020). People is more willing to buy local, organic food and experience nature (Gfk, 2020, Shet, 2020).

Despite both researcher and practitioners are devoting a growing interest on these topics, at the best of our knowledge, they still fail to shed the lights on the opportunity that can come from merging these two goals.

Thus, in this paper we try to understand if firms consider consumer green needs in the customer experience management?

Signori *et al.* (2019) (p. 161) coined the term concept of “Sustainable Customer Experience” (SCE) as the *process that creates holistic value thanks to the customer’s engagement derived by sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behaviours evoked by sustainable stimuli, based on economic, social and environmental sustainability*. This new definition is an upgrade of the traditional definition of customer experience which includes the concept of sustainable stimuli but without any successful empirical evidence to support the definition. Currently, the only empirical phenomenon which link the environmental policy and customers is the communications of green practices. To develop an integrative model, firms should consider the dimension of environmental sustainability in their customer experience management scale measurement. The research opportunities presented show that, even though research has already dealt with a multitude of customer- and sustainability-related issues, an integrated perspective considering the interconnectedness of the dimensions of sustainability and the effects of sustainability-oriented CEM initiatives throughout the entire customer experience is missing.

In this explorative stage of the research, our contribution is to identify the key features of each approach and the possible meetings points. By borrowing the main meetings points emerged at the end of the theoretical paragraphs, where each approach has been considered individually and the combined exploratory literature review, we propose a new integrated model *environmental-oriented* customer experience management (EOCEM) as novel approach to be competitive (see table 1).

Tab. 1 – Towards an integrative model



	<b>CES</b>	<b>CEM</b>	<b>EOCEM</b>
<b>Strategic Orientation</b>	Resource efficiency, environmental differentiation, alliance	Customer-centric cultural mindset, experience oriented, alliance	Green cultural mindset oriented to the experience and the collaborations
<b>Tactical Orientation</b>	Re-design of product and services, re-design of production process, re-design Supply chain	Re-design of products and services, Omnichannel touchpoints, customization, empathy	Design of green touchpoints
<b>Internal Orientation</b>	Employees engagement towards environment	Employees engagement towards customers	Employees engagement towards EOCEM
<b>Primary goals</b>	Customer environmental awareness, reduce production and consumption environmental impact	Customer satisfaction Perceived value, customer loyalty and reputation growth	Design successful customer experience through <i>green emotions</i>
<b>Action tools</b>	Green product life-cycle Green innovation Green collaborations	Customer journey Cross-selling, digital innovation	Green experience providers that allow the reduction of price sensitivity

As clear from the table 1, both the approaches seem to be linked by a customer (people) experience orientation and an environment orientation. Indeed, firstly, both are oriented to the re-design of product and services to build successful customer experience. To do so, they use the customer journey model to map the strategic stages and the touchpoints to implement for a satisfying consumer-brand relationship. Secondly, both care about the product quality but firm should force to put environmental sustainability in the creation of customer experience (e.g. evoke “green emotions”, reduce the use of polluting touchpoints) and the experience in the delivery of green products (e.g. establish a seamless relationship with customers along the journey, provide a symbolic value to the products). Third, both require a cultural mindset based on the employee engagement, being the primary customers of any firm and then, precursors to delivering great

customer experiences. In fact, firms that well engage and invest in the wellbeing of their employees, are far more likely to have those employees treat customers well.

This proposal model confirm that both the approaches are considered strategic for the competition; both consider environment and experience at a strategic level which include an internal and an external perspective; third, both put people wellbeing at the core of the analysis to be competitive and are oriented toward a long-term success based on an *other-oriented* equity.

To tackle the research question, we suppose that CES and CEM may be integrated in a collaborative model (3 E's model) oriented to the protection of the *environment*, the creation of *experience* with the final goal to create *equity* for customers, firms and society.

## **Implications and conclusion**

As Forrester said in 2010, *if you are a customer experience or a sustainability manager, go introduce yourself to the other and start exploring ways that you can support each other's work and build credibility within the company. Not only will your success create happier customers and a better planet, it will create a more profitable company.* This concept is an evolution of the traditional customer experience management, due to the higher sensitivity of customers specifically to environmental sustainability.

The present study offers a first attempt to identify the meeting points and the opportunities derived from a strategic integrated approach between CES and CEM, which are two of the most relevant terms in marketing and management at an academic and practitioner level. The first study's goal was to define the stat-of-the-art on CES and CEM individually and combined. Second, we provided an extension of the few existing studies on the integration of the two perspective with a model which emphasizes the common strategical and practical orientations and proposes an integrated approach named EOCEM.

Managers should take in consideration the opportunity to integrate the work of both the department for the sharing implications derived. First, the EOCEM represents a way by which firms implement a green cultural mindset experience oriented to differentiate their value proposition.

In doing so, in the short term, they could benefit of the opportunity to reduce the price sensitivity because the perceived value of their product (or service) offering will be higher. Indeed, customers will be more positively attracted from firms who care about the environment and people experience and it's probable that they will be more willing to pay for premium price because of a higher perceived brand value.

Moreover, in the long term, this integrated strategy will stimulate customer loyalty, brand image and reputation growth, by improving the stakeholders' perception.

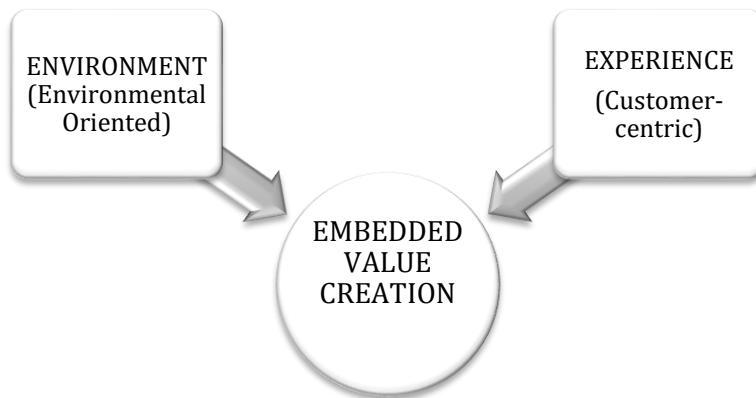
The final outcome of this merged process is the creation of firms' embedded value creation, where not just customers or primary stakeholder could take the advantage of this strategy, but indirectly also the natural environment and the whole society.

Finally, at an operational level, through the definition of an EOCEM, the entire purchasing process may become green. An inevitable positive externality derives from the fact that through the integration of CES and CEM, the delivery of green experiences may arise. At this point, an interesting integration is the possibility to define the and induce the "green emotions" and the possibility to implement the "green touchpoints" along the journey.

Being an explorative study based on a point of view, the present work offers opportunities for future research. Based on the table presented, next studies should be conducted to empirically

analyse firms who are CES oriented, CEM oriented and EOCEM oriented, to confirm/disconfirm the 3E's proposal model.

Figure 1 – The 3E's proposal model



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